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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TASHKENT 001949

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SUBJECT: UZBEK HUMAN RIGHTS OMBUDSMAN FOCUSES ON STRUCTURAL

REFORM, SOCIO-ECONOMIC GRIEVANCES

REF: TASHKENT 1822

Classified By: P/E Section Chief Ted Burkhalter; reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Ambassador met November 1 with Sayora Rashidova, Parliamentary Ombudsman for Human Rights and daughter of former Uzbek Communist Party boss Sharof Rashidov. Although Rashidova operates under certain political limits, she is clearly aware of broader human rights issues in Uzbekistan and is engaged in tinkering at the margins with some of Uzbekistan's more serious reform challenges. Rashidova's small Tashkent office is supplemented by thirteen regional offices throughout the country. End summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador met November 1 with Sayora Rashidova, Parliamentary Ombudsman for Human Rights. Rashidova was formerly a Member of the Oliy Majlis - the lower house of Parliament - but gave up her seat to focus full time on her role as Ombudsman and (as she puts it) to allow herself the objectivity and political detachment necessary as Ombudsman. Rashidova said that in Soviet times the government paid scant attention to human rights, but since independence the GOU had taken a number of significant steps. She recounted the creation in 1997 of her own office and in the same year of the GOU-run National Center for Human Rights.

¶3. (C) Rashidova was aware of the gross alleged and documented violations of human rights in Uzbekistan. She noted that the Ombudsman had worked with the OSCE, American Bar Association, various U.S. and European human rights ombudsmen, and other foreign organizations, as well as with various GOU ministries, to train police in investigative techniques and to sensitize prison officials to prisoner rights. Ambassador raised the case of imprisoned human rights activist Mutabar Tojibayeva (reftel), whose family claims has recently been subjected to inappropriate behavior (having a noose left in her cell and being denied medical treatment). Rashidova was aware of the allegations but said they appeared inaccurate. Tojibayeva's medical difficulties were, she said, the result of Tojibayeva's having failed to take her medications. (Note: Human rights activists in Uzbekistan have long complained that political prisoners are often denied access to medications. End note.) Rashidova explained also that in many cases the people calling themselves human rights activists were uneducated and emotional people and implied that this was the case with those who had taken on Tojibayeva's case.

14. (C) Rashidova detailed for Ambassador the scope of her work. Her office is comprised of less than a dozen individuals in Tashkent, and she is supported in the provinces by thirteen branch offices. The Ombudsman is concerned with all aspects of the rights of Uzbek citizens. She explained that her office hears complaints, monitors cases, and provides free advice. In the past, she said, complaints about judicial procedure (i.e., unjust convictions) were more common, but in the past year economic and social complaints were more common. (Comment: This tracks with our own observations - people on the street are increasingly preoccupied with getting by in the tightening economic circumstances. End comment.)

15. (C) The Ombudsman, according to Rashidova, delivers an annual February address to Parliament. She also meets with Parliamentarians, both in plenary session and in committee, as necessary. She admitted that her small staff can monitor only a limited number of cases each year, and she therefore selects cases strategically. Right now, for example, she is focused on cases dealing with delivery of health care and is working with the Ministry of Health to improve response time. The Ombudsman also has been involved in development and implementation of new laws on topics such as political liberalization, the abolition of the death penalty, and procedures for judicial review of arrest and detention. Rashidova expressed interest in continued and expanded contact with counterparts in the West. She expressed particular concern about the plight of Uzbek migrant laborers who suffer abuse abroad. (Comment: Reflecting a typical Soviet - er, Uzbek - mindset, she spoke of "illegal immigration" and the need to improve regulation. In our experience, the GOU has a genuine concern for the welfare of

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migrant workers and believes that better controls over them are a guarantee of better treatment. End comment.)

Comment

16. (C) Rashidova is the daughter of former First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Uzbek SSR, Sharof Rashidov. Current Uzbek President Islom Karimov owes his rise to Rashidov and continues to treat the extended (and extensive) Rashidov family with deference, something that perhaps allows Mrs. Rashidova a bit more leeway to carry out her Ombudsman duties with some credibility. Rashidova's two sisters are married to Aziz Kamilov, the Uzbek Ambassador to Washington, and Alisher Vakhidov, the Uzbek Permanent Representative to the United Nations. While on one level Rashidova clearly kept to the current GOU script, her very pointed comment that complaints in the past year have focused on socio-economic issues did resonate. Economic woes are an issue the elite here have noticed and that they know must be addressed.

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